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ABSTRACT

A qualitative study examined the revision of writing on the word processor of two re-entering students in advanced composition in comparison to three traditional-age students. Its purposes were to see whether there was any difference in adaptation to the word processor between the two groups and whether each writer had a consistent revision pattern when composing using the word processor. Twelve composing processes by each student were recorded on videotape and then analyzed by the Bridwell coding scheme. Additional data collection procedures included retrospective interviews about three essays by each student, daily student logs, interviews of the students and of the instructor, and measures of each writer's computer and writing apprehension. Analysis indicated that the amount each student revised varied from essay to essay, that substitution was the main revision operation for all five writers, and that the writers' revision styles were not the same for every composition. The re-entering students revised more than the traditional age students, especially making more multi-sentence revisions. They managed time better than two of the three traditional-age students and had no more apprehension about writing or the use of the word processor; in fact, they learned to use more of the word processor's capabilities. (RAE)

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Case Studies of Re-entering Students in Advanced Composition

Composing Using the Word Processor

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative research study examined the revision on the word processor of two re-entering students in Advanced Composition in comparison to three traditional-age students. Its purposes were to see whether there was any difference in adaptation to the word processor between the two groups and whether each writer had a consistent revision pattern when composing using the word processor. Twelve compositions by each student were recorded on videotape and then analyzed by the Bridwell (1980) coding scheme. Additional data collection procedures included retrospective interviews of three essays by each student, daily student logs, interviews of the students and of the instructor, and measures of each writer's computer and writing apprehension.

Analysis indicated that the amount each student revised varied from essay to essay, that substitution was the main revision operation for all five writers, and that the writers' revision style was not the same for every composition. The re-entering students revised more than the traditional-age students, especially making more multi-sentence revisions. They managed time better than two of the three traditional-age students and had no more apprehension about writing or the use of the word processor; in fact, they learned to use more of the word processor's capabilities.

Case Studies of Re-entering Students in Advanced Composition

Composing Using the Word Processor

Eleanor Parks Gaunder

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The number of re-entering students has doubled on university campuses nationwide in the past ten years. These students who are over twenty-five typically have either worked or have married and had children or both during the intervening years. Some started college but did not complete an undergraduate degree; others are just beginning college. The percentage of re-entering students at the Southeastern university where I teach has increased rapidly in the last three years so that approximately 22 percent of our students are re-entering. About 60 percent of them are women. Nationwide, re-entry women also comprise a majority of non-traditional students (Hodgkinson, 1983).

Typically colleges have integrated non-traditional students into traditional academic programs. In spite of increasing numbers of re-entering students in college, we have done little research about their particular needs and skills. Greenwood's (1988) research revealed that 12 re-entering women students in first semester English composition were without a well defined sense of direction or an established identity, without confidence in their ability to learn, and without adequate amounts of time to perform to their own level of satisfaction in school and at home. The four returning adults in Gillam-Scott's (1985) study had initial

writing anxiety in first year composition, but by the end of the quarter, three of the four had become confident, able writers.

SUBJECTS

The two re-entry women who were the subjects of the following case studies represent a different population--upperclass re-entering students. Both Natalie and Lydia had taken first year composition years earlier, had returned to college and were taking Advanced Composition as a required course for their major or minor. Natalie had completed an undergraduate degree in business 10 years before and had been a business accountant for 5 years, during which time she also had her first two children. She had known when she majored in business that she did not like it as well as English and had decided to return to college to become certified to teach English. During this first semester back in college, she was taking 10 hours in undergraduate English and education courses and working part-time 5-6 hours a week while also being a full-time mother to two preschoolers. She had a very supportive husband and mother who helped take care of the children.

Lydia had worked for 15 years as a laboratory technician before returning to undergraduate school to pursue a biology major and an English minor. She was the editor of the state laboratory technology newsletter and was especially interested in developing technical writing skills in her field. She had taken two courses each semester for five semesters, a pattern that is typical of many re-entering students who are working full time. She was married but did not have children. Her husband understood

many of the pressures because he was also back in school as well as working.

I selected these women along with three traditional-age undergraduate Advanced Composition students to participate in a study on revision using the word processor. I chose to include two re-entering students in the study to see if these more experienced, confident writers adpated to the use of the computer any differently from the traditional-age students. Even mentioning computers to some re-entering students causes consternation, but these two were quite willing to learn to use the word processor. Natalie had just purchased a Franklin home computer, which was one of the two types available in the computer workroom, but had not yet learned to use it, and Lydia stated that she had "never used a word processor before but would love to learn."

PROCEDURE

To examine the students' written composing process, I used a method developed by Williamson (1985) to interface a computer and a videotape recorder in order to record all of the keystrokes on videotape. This record from start to finish of the written part of the composing process gave a developmental picture of their adaption to the use of the word processor as well as a visual record of the revisions as they occurred. Natalie typed all twelve of her essays for Advanced Composition on the word processor, but Lydia only completed three and wrote two other initial drafts on the word processor because of the time pressures of her job. She wrote and revised the rest of her assignments by hand. Both students kept all handwritten drafts, notes, and outlines in their folders. In addition

to the videotapes and drafts, I gathered the following data: daily logs about their composing on the word processor, measures of their computer apprehension and of their writing apprehension, interviews at the beginning and the end of the semester, retrospective interviews during the play-back of the videotapes, and holistic evaluations of each of the compositions. I analyzed the data on videotape using the Bridwell (1980) code in order to examine the amount and type of revision they did for different types of exposition and to determine if the students had a consistent revision style when they were composing on the word processor.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Neither of these re-entry students was apprehensive about her writing as measured on the Reigstad-McAndrew (1984) Writing Attitude Scale. On a scale where 40 is minimally apprehensive and negative 40 is most apprehensive, Natalie was not apprehensive with a score of positive 32; Lydia also fell into the positive range with a score of 8. The re-entering students were no more apprehensive about writing than the three traditional-age students whose scores ranged between positive 9 and 18. Of the five writers, Natalie was the least apprehensive. In the initial interview, she explained, "I really write better than I talk. I feel that I can express myself better." Furthermore, she stated that she felt confident about her writing and that she enjoyed writing, especially letter writing. Natalie agreed that she enjoyed writing, but did indicate that she was often reluctant to begin a piece of writing because of the difficulty of starting and organizing.

Natalie indicated no computer apprehension on the pre and post computer attitude surveys. Lydia was more neutral in her responses on the preliminary computer attitude survey, strongly or mildly agreeing with the positive statements but remaining neutral in response to two negative statements about the difficulty of learning to use a computer. At the end of the semester, in spite of some difficulties using the computers, both were extremely positive and showed no computer apprehension. This was also true for the other three students in the study.

Like all of the students in the study, both Natalie and Lydia expressed some apprehension when they were coping with difficulty with the computer. But their apprehension did not seem to affect them once the problem was solved. Natalie's greatest difficulty occurred when her research paper filled the memory capacity of a file before she had completed it. She learned to move sections to the clipboard and then to the new file. Although she stated that the computer "nearly sabotaged" her research paper during the final two days, she solved this problem with limited help from me. From that time on she composed all of her papers from start to finish on the word processor. Lydia's greatest difficulty was forgetting the commands because of the long time intervals in between her use of the computer. Nevertheless, she always found a solution, usually by experimenting. Perhaps because of the difficulties they had, both of these women learned to use more of the computer's capacities than the traditional-age students in the study, including the block move, the clipboard, and the split screen.

Both of these women were very good typists, having used this skill regularly in their careers. Lydia, in particular, was a fast typist. Other students working in the computer workroom commented about the speed that she typed on the Apple IIe, which has a light touch.

Although Natalie and Lydia had had more typing and on-the-job writing experience than the traditional-age students, their experience in English classes had been very similar. This was the first class any of them had taken which emphasized revision. Most of the writing they had done for other English classes had been either in-class pressure writing or research papers or analysis of literature done outside of class. Both Natalie and Lydia had taken first year composition at other universities, Natalie 14 years before and Lydia 17 years earlier. They had also taken at least four other courses for which they had written several papers.

The portfolio evaluation at the end of the semester by two trained holistic scorers revealed that Lydia was the strongest of the five writers. Natalie was rated third of the five although the essays in her portfolio were ranked almost as high as Laura's, one of the traditional students. On a scale of 1 to 4 with 1 being the highest rating, both Natalie and Laura received 2's and 3's on their essays whereas Lydia received mostly 1's. The other two traditional-age students were rated lower with 3's and 4's. In the instructor's opinion, Lydia's writing improved the least during the semester because it was so good to begin with and it remained so consistently good. Lydia's holistic scores, which were almost all 1's, confirm [illegible] is impression. Both the instructor and the holistic scorers commented that Natalie and Laura were more conventional school writers than

Lydia. Perhaps Lydia had developed her more authentic voice because she regularly wrote a statewide newsletter column to an actual audience.

Lydia, in the initial interview, indicated that she considered each essay she wrote difficult because she had perfectionist tendencies. Natalie had many of the same perfectionist tendencies, often writing 4-5 drafts. She indicated in her initial interview that prior to the use of the computer she had frequently started an essay again on fresh paper because she was dissatisfied either with the content or with the messy draft. She praised the computer's capability to allow her to make as many changes as she wished without requiring her to type several copies, but she did not achieve the same polished final results as Lydia. Nevertheless, the conscientiousness of the two re-entering students was noticeably different from the two weaker traditional students and similar to that of Laura, the stronger traditional-age student.

The re-entering students also had excellent time management skills as did the stronger traditional-age student, Laura. As a matter of fact, time management was the most signficant variable explaining differences among these five students. The two traditional-age writers who were poor time managers had great difficulty completing all of their assignments and definitely skimped on revisions once they got behind in the course. Both began having difficulty during their work on the research paper, which they turned in late. Barb got so behind that she skipped two assignments entirely and Ron wrote six essays in the last two weeks of school.

The re-entry women were not without some time management difficulties. Lydia, as I explained earlier, did not use the word processor consistently

because of having to be out of town for her job, but she did turn in all of her revised and well written assignments when she was supposed to. Natalie panicked when she thought she would be unable to turn in her research paper on time, but she got someone to keep her children longer so she could finish and print out her final draft. She did turn in some essays on which she was still making changes in ink or pencil at the last minute. Neither of these re-entry women felt that she had adequate time to do her best, but each used the time she had more efficiently than two of the three younger students.

None of the students revised all of his or her essays the same way. For example, Natalie's early pattern seemed to be to copy over drafts making the draft neater and rephrasing numerous ideas in the draft. Although she wrote five drafts of her second essay, she was not doing much more than tinkering with words. Substitution at the phrase and sentence level was her main revision activity. Later in the semester, however, changing the structure of the essay and the presentation of her ideas became more prevalent. For example, she completely redrafted her comparison three times, and although she retained 14 ideas from the original to the final version, the essay was so totally reconceived that none of the paragraphs was much like any in the original version. She added 5 1/2 paragraphs to the third version, which became the basis for the final draft. Altogether, she made 39 multi-sentence revisions in the third, fourth, and fifth revisions. The essay she wrote next was revised primarily by adding content. She went to the library to read material and then added ideas to her essay to strengthen her content. Thus, in most of

her essays, her primary revision activity was substitution, but her concept of revision expanded during the semester so that she totally revised structure and content when she felt that she needed to.

Lydia developed a unique approach to the use of the word processor to improve an existing draft. Above each paragraph of her original draft she would rewrite the paragraph, usually keeping the gist of her ideas the same but significantly changing the wording. Usually she would delete the old version when she completed the new paragraph. The other four writers tended to revise from the beginning to the end of the essay by making revisions to the existing text rather than totally redrafting each paragraph in the essay. Occasionally they would drastically revise a paragraph, but most of the time they did not significantly change their original text.

My sample of 10-12 essays written by each student allows me to observe each writer's variations, but my sample of only two re-entering students compared to three traditional-age students does not permit me to do much more than suggest that there may be differences in the writing of these two groups of students. These two re-entry women writers adapted well to composing on the word processor, but Bridwell-Bowles, Johnson, and Brehe's (1987) study of experienced writers suggests that the writers' composing style may be the signficant variable in whether writers are comfortable using the word processor. Both of the re-entry writers in this study had composing styles that tranferred readily to the word processor, and because they tended to redraft completely or to revise several times, they were very positive about the effect of the word processor on their revision

process and they learned more capabilities of the word processor than their younger counterparts. They made more multi-sentence revisions than the other writers in the study and definitely began to look at text as fluid, not fixed. They also managed time better than two of the traditional-age students with more time for revision as a result. Nevertheless, there were some essays for which they did not feel that their busy personal and academic lives had allowed sufficient time for revision.

Unlike the first semester re-entry women in Greenwood's (1988) study, these two women do fit the pattern suggested in adult education literature of active, self-directed learners with considerable experience and self-confidence as a result of that experience. Interestingly, though, although both were confident writers to begin with, both somewhat revised their perceptions of themselves as writers during the semester, developing what the instructor and I consider to be more realistic perceptions. Natalie learned that correct conventional writing is not necessarily the best writing. Lydia, praised by her peers and her instructor, became an even more confident writer and changed her major from biology to a double major in English and biology.

Most students returning to college may not have used their composition skills as much as these two had during the interim before returning to school. A larger sample of both men and women returning after a break in their education would give a much better idea of how readily re-entering students who are quite a few years away from their initial writing experiences in college adapt to composing on the word processor, to revising extensively when they feel they need to, and to becoming effective

writers. Also, it would allow more adequate assessment of the effects apprehension may have on the growth of their writing skills. In the meantime, composition instructors can be sensitive to the possibility that re-entry students may have special needs and special strengths as writers.

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